

IN REPLY REFER TO:

United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Grand Canyon National Park
P.O. Box 129
Grand Canyon, Arizona 86023-0129

D18 (GRCA 8215)

June 10, 2004

Dear Interested Party:

Reference: Hermit Road Rehabilitation Request for Comments on Preliminary Alternatives for Rehabilitation (General Scoping)

The National Park Service (NPS) is in the initial stages of planning for the rehabilitation of Hermit Road, the roadway that connects Grand Canyon Village to Hermits Rest along the west rim of Grand Canyon National Park. Hermit Road is a two-lane paved road approximately eight miles long, which includes approximately seven miles of main roadway and approximately one mile of scenic overlook access roads and parking areas (Enclosure 1).

Hermit Road (previously named West Rim Drive) and its associated turnouts and overlooks are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. It was constructed in 1911-1913 as a scenic roadway - the only road on the South Rim of the park constructed as a scenic road and not as a connecting road. The road was substantially upgraded in the early 1930s, and this alignment remains today. The road is approximately 18 to 20 feet wide. In some areas there is a one-foot shoulder on each side, and in other areas, this shoulder is non-existent. Currently, the park operates a shuttle bus system on this roadway for most of the year and vehicular traffic is restricted to shuttle buses, tour buses, service vehicles, and a limited number of private vehicles for visitors with accessibility needs. The road is open to all vehicle traffic during the winter (December through February). Bicyclists and pedestrians use the area year-round. A pedestrian trail exists along the rim on the north side of Hermit Road. It is paved from Grand Canyon Village to Maricopa Point but narrow in places. West of Maricopa Point, the trail is a dirt path and not marked with any signage. These paths are, in essence, social trails and not suitable for bicycles at this time. The paths' close proximity to the rim causes many pedestrians to use the road.

Purpose and Need for Action

A June 2000 Road Inventory Report prepared by the Federal Highways Administration documented that approximately 60% of the road was in poor condition and 40% was in fair condition.

In January 2001, a Traffic Engineering Safety Study (also prepared by the Federal Highways Administration) was conducted for Hermit Road. The study documented numerous safety issues pertaining to overall poor road condition, to include moderate raveling and rutting, severe rippling in multiple locations, frequent cracking, and loss of pavement along shoulders. Accidents continue to occur along this road. As documented in the January 2001 report, there were a total of 63 accidents along Hermit Road between 1988 and 1999 (an average of about 6 accidents per year).

In addition to the critical need to address the road's poor condition and upgrade the road to current safety standards, there is also a need to address bicycle and pedestrian use along this road corridor. Pedestrian and bicycle use occurs on the road, in part because the existing trails are not adequate to support both pedestrians and bicycles and in some areas there simply is not enough room between the roadway and the edge of the canyon rim for an adequate trail. However, pedestrian use is high in this area and many park visitors choose to walk or bike between scenic overlooks along Hermit Road. Pedestrian and bicycle use, combined with shuttle buses, tour buses, and other vehicle traffic on this narrow two-lane road, creates a safety hazard.

Grand Canyon National Park's 1995 General Management Plan (GMP) identifies Hermit Road as a primary route for the park's transit system. The plan states automobiles will be restricted on Hermit Road year-round (as well as all other roads on the South Rim between Hermits Rest and Yaki Point) and will be accessible only by transit, hiking, or biking. On page 28 of the GMP, it states that an off-road bike and pedestrian trail system will be provided to link Hermits Rest and Desert View. These aspects of the GMP have not yet been achieved and are being evaluated as part of the planning process for this proposal.

Therefore, the primary management concerns and related objectives for rehabilitating Hermit Road include the following:

- a. The overall road condition is poor, posing significant safety concerns, and needs to be improved.
- b. The condition of many of the parking areas and overlooks is also poor, and improvements in safety and accessibility in these areas are needed.
- c. The road width is too narrow for safe passage of buses and private vehicles and needs to be increased.
- d. Pedestrian and bicycle access to Hermits Rest is unsafe and inadequate and conflicts with vehicle traffic on the roadway. A pedestrian and bicycle use plan needs to be developed for this area.
- e. The roadway and its associated turnouts and overlooks are historic and considered significant cultural resources. Rehabilitation efforts need to balance the preservation of these cultural resources with improvements in safety and accessibility for vehicles, bicyclists, and pedestrians.

Preliminary Alternatives Under Consideration

Several alternatives have been preliminarily developed to address the purpose and need for action and the management objectives listed above. The NPS has not yet selected a preferred alternative, pending further detailed evaluation of these alternatives. We anticipate that some of these alternatives may change and/or that new alternatives will be added as the planning process proceeds, based on continued input from NPS staff, other agencies, and the public. The alternatives under consideration at this time are briefly described below and are displayed on the enclosures. These alternatives have been field inspected and are considered feasible from an engineering standpoint.

- 1. Widen the road to 22 to 24 feet to safely accommodate bus traffic.** This alternative would allow for approximately 2 to 4 feet of additional road width for buses to safely pass on the road when headed in opposite directions. Under this alternative, pedestrians and bicyclists would continue to use the road as they currently do. This alternative would minimize the impact on the historic character of the road and slightly improve the existing situation.
- 2. Widen the road to 26 to 28 feet to safely accommodate bus traffic; add a 2- to 3-foot wide one-way bike path to each lane; and improve the pedestrian trail between Maricopa Point and Hermits Rest.** Under this alternative, the additional bike lanes would safely accommodate vehicle and bicycle use on the road but would not entirely separate them. Separate pedestrian use would be accommodated with trail improvements with the understanding that, in a few limited areas, pedestrians would still choose to use the road where there is not enough room for a trail between the roadway and the canyon rim. This alternative would affect the historic character of the road but would likely be able to be implemented without disturbance to historic culverts and headwalls.
- 3. Construct a Loop Road; reconstruct the existing road in its current width to accommodate a west-bound one-way bus lane and a two-way bicycle lane; construct a separate east-bound one-way road along existing utility and historic road corridors south of the existing road; and improve the pedestrian trail between Maricopa Point and Hermits Rest.** This alternative would allow for a separation of two-way bus traffic and would allow for safe accommodation of vehicle use and bicycle use on the road. Separate pedestrian use would be accommodated with trail improvements, as described in Alternative 2. This alternative would require widening of the roadway to approximately 24 feet. This width would help to preserve its historic character but would introduce a new heavily-used roadway where one does not currently exist. The new roadway would have a paved surface approximately 14 feet wide. This would have some level of impact to natural and cultural resources, the magnitude and degree of which has yet to be determined. This would also result in changes to

the current shuttle bus operation. Several options for the alignment of the east-bound loop are under consideration, as shown in Enclosure 2. The alignments of three of these preliminary alternatives (alternatives 3a, 3b, and 3c) are schematically displayed in Enclosure 2.

4. Widen the road to 22 to 24 feet; construct a separate bicycle trail; and improve the pedestrian trail between Maricopa Point and Hermit Rest. As in Alternative 1, this alternative would allow for approximately 2 to 4 feet of additional road width for buses to safely pass on the road when headed in opposite directions. Under this alternative, pedestrians and bicyclists would each use a separate access route. Options under consideration for a separate bicycle path include using existing access road and utility corridors south of the existing road, as described in Alternative 3 for buses (Enclosure 2), constructing a trail separate from, but adjacent to, the existing road on the south side, or utilizing the existing 1912 historic road corridor (Enclosure 3). Separate pedestrian use would be accommodated with trail improvements, as described in Alternative 2. In the area between the Abyss and Pima Point, bicycles and pedestrians may be able to be jointly accommodated where the historic road corridor north of the existing road is wide enough to accommodate both users. This alternative would minimize the impact on the historic character of the road and improve the existing situation, allowing for a separation of all three users (buses, pedestrians, and bicyclists) in most areas. The option to construct an approximately 6- to 9-foot paved bicycle path south of the existing road from Grand Canyon Village to the Abyss would require substantial vegetation disturbance and tree removal and would have impacts to the character of the road. The option to utilize existing utility and other corridors, including the historic 1912 road corridor, would likely require less disturbance than the first option but would still have some level of impact to natural and cultural resources. The magnitude and degree of these impacts from any of the options have yet to be determined. This alternative would restrict bicyclists to the non-rim side of the road for over half of the distance, eliminating or substantially reducing canyon views from this trail.

Projected Project Implementation

This project is expected to be implemented in 2007. While under construction, the NPS is considering closing the road entirely to park visitors or implementing partial closures, in order to expedite the completion of the project.

We invite your comments.

Before we begin the environmental analysis for this project, we would like to hear your viewpoints on the purpose and need for this proposal, and any issues or concerns you have regarding

the preliminary alternatives under consideration or the possibility for road closures during construction. Please send your comments to the address below, or email Sara White, Compliance Officer, at sara_white@nps.gov no later than **July 16, 2004**.

Grand Canyon National Park
Attn: Sara White, Compliance Officer
P.O. Box 129
Grand Canyon, AZ 86023

Please be aware that names and addresses of respondents may be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act. Our practice is to make comments, including names and home addresses of respondents, available for public review during regular business hours. Individual respondents may request that we withhold their home address from the record, which we will honor to the extent allowable by law. There also may be circumstances in which we would withhold from the record a respondent's identity, as allowable by law. If you wish us to withhold your name and/or address, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comment. We will make all submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, available for public inspection in their entirety. Anonymous comments may be included in the public record. However, the National Park Service is not legally required to consider or respond to anonymous comments.

We appreciate your input on these proposals. If you have any questions regarding the project, please call Debbie Lutch, Environmental Protection Specialist, at (928) 774-0095 or Sara White, Compliance Officer, at (928) 638-7956.

Sincerely,

Joseph F. Alston
Superintendent

Enclosures (3)

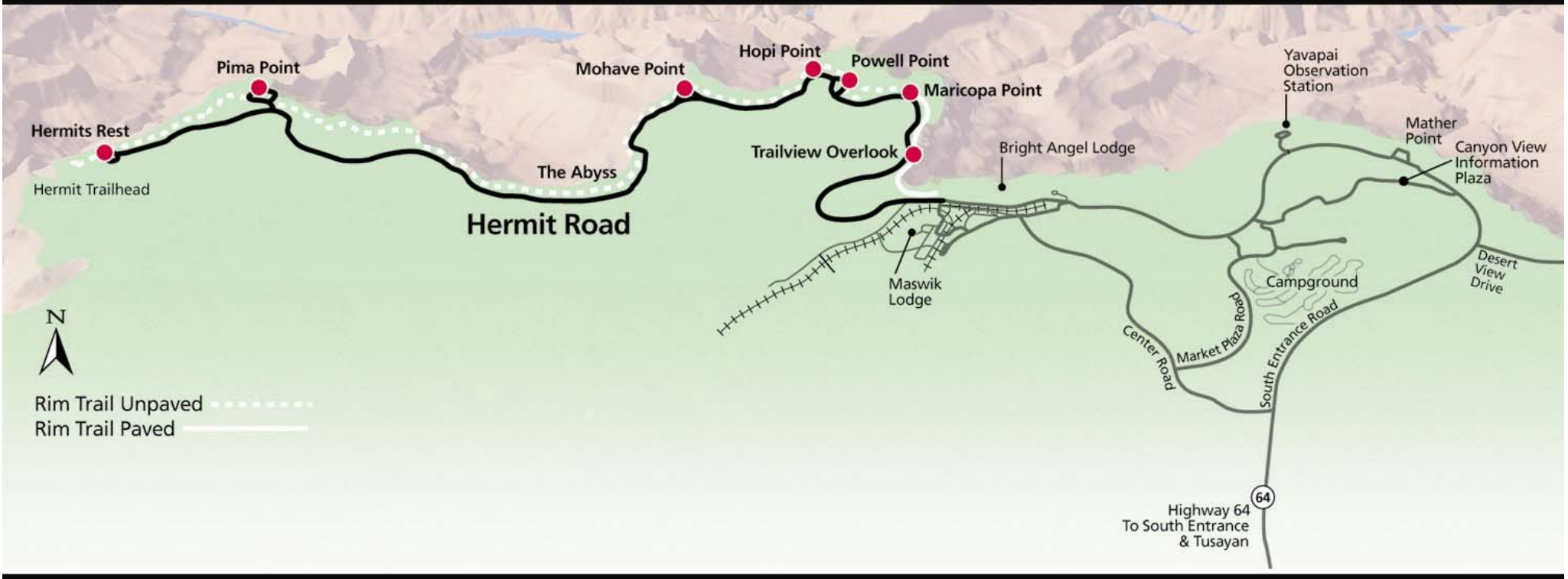
cc:

Sara White (GRCA 8213) w/copy encs

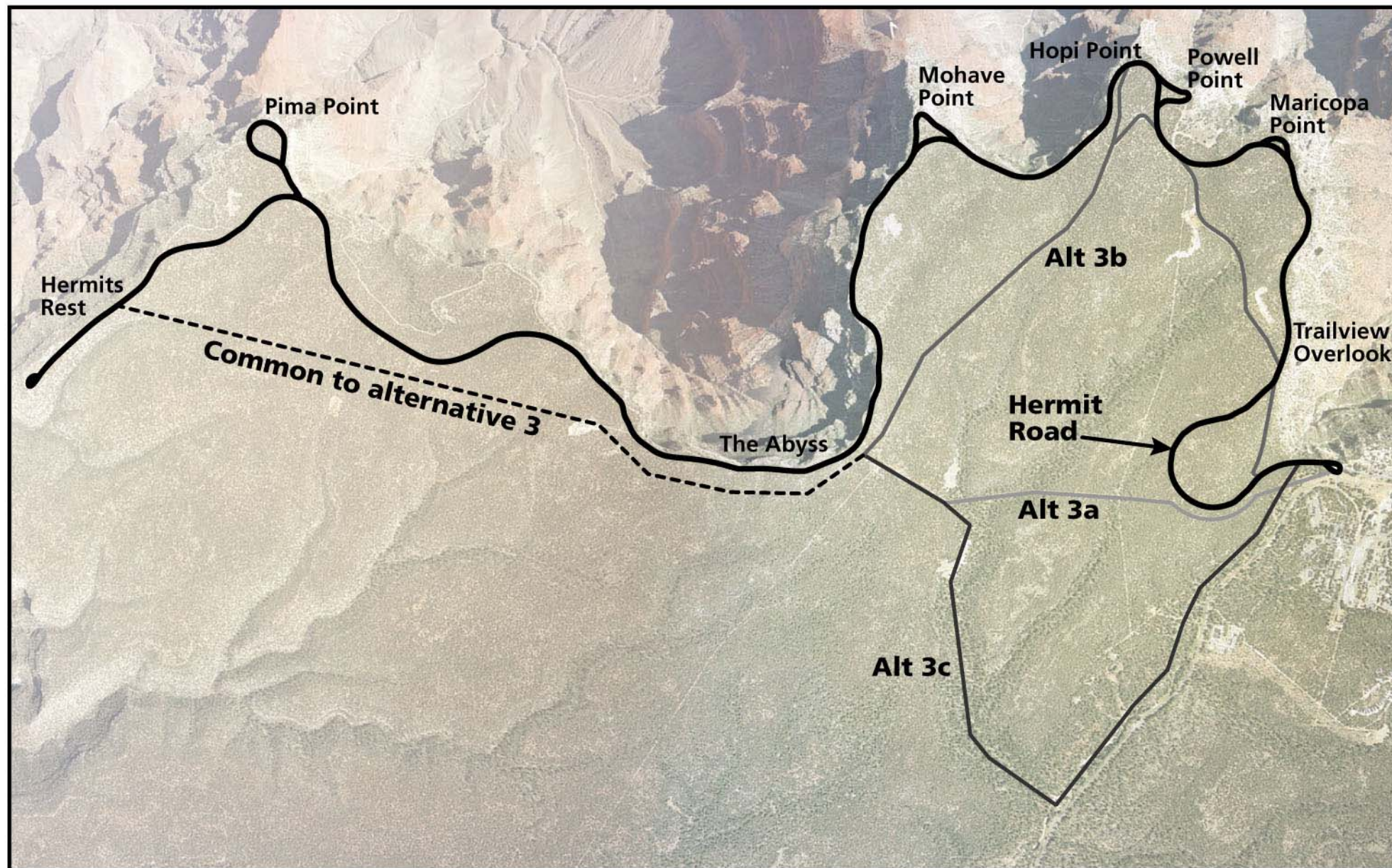
Mark Johnston (GRCA 8215) w/copy encs

<p>If you would like to receive a hard copy of the environmental document for this project when it is complete, please contact Sara White at the address above, at (928) 638-7956, or at sara_white@nps.gov, and one will be sent to you during the comment period. If you do not respond to this request, a hard copy of the environmental document will not be sent to you. However, please be aware that this environmental document and other environmental documents are routinely available for your review on the Grand Canyon National Park website at www.nps.gov/grca/mgmt/compliance/</p>

Enclosure 1. Project Area Map
Hermit Road, South Rim, Grand Canyon National Park



Enclosure 2. Preliminary options under consideration for a loop road (Alternative 3)
Hermit Road, South Rim, Grand Canyon National Park



Enclosure 3. Preliminary Alternative under consideration for a separate bicycle path
Hermit Road, South Rim, Grand Canyon National Park

